

# **FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS**

## **A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

### **Acts 8: 2 – 40**

Acts chapter 8 begins with a great wave of persecution against the church. It seems that Stephen's martyrdom opened the way for all the opponents of the young Christian faith to jump on the bandwagon and join in this general persecution. But the consequence of this was not what they expected - quite the reverse, in fact. Far from wiping out the church, it scattered into the surrounding countryside, took root and grew, rather like a forest fire, being blown by the wind, and spreading at an amazing rate.

As part of this process, we encounter Philip: another of the seven deacons, who took the word of the Lord into Samaria, and evidently had a very lively ministry. Like Stephen, Philip is an administrator, but he seems to be a pretty good evangelist as well. It goes to show – you can't pin the Holy Spirit down.

Both men paved the way for the Gentile mission. Stephen's contribution was to demonstrate that Jesus was Lord of all, not just those who followed Jewish practice (the law and temple). Philip's task was to take then gospel to the Samaritans, cousins to the Jews, and not at all popular with them. But the Gospel transcends these tribal and historic differences.

In verses 1 – 4 we see a three-fold chain of cause and effect.

- Stephen's martyrdom led to a persecution of the church.
- The persecution led to the dispersion of the faith throughout Judea and Samaria. Jerusalem and the temple begin to take a lesser part in the story.
- The dispersion led to new evangelistic activity.

Whilst in Samaria, Philip encounters Simon the sorcerer. He was a man who could exercise great power and was something of a local legend. He saw Philip, and wanted to buy some of his power. Of course, God's power is not for sale in that kind of way, and when Peter arrived in Samaria, he rebuked Simon for trying to buy power.

You can't buy God with money. Simon is told that his only hope is to repent and turn to the Lord in faith.

Sadly, Simon the sorcerer appears to show little sign of repentance, or even contrition, and to this very day, has given his name to one of the worst possible abuses of spiritual power. 'Simony' appears in our dictionary as the offence of offering or accepting money for appointment to ecclesiastical office. As such, it is a great betrayal of the Holy Spirit. God's gifts cannot be bought or sold, but must be received as the gift of the Holy Spirit and received in faith.

Simon makes no further appearance in the story, so we never know the outcome to this episode. As we see elsewhere in Acts, Luke is more interested in sharing examples of spiritual significance than in giving us a full account of every individual who appears in the story.

An interesting aside in this story from Samaria concerns the place of baptism. Philip is evidently baptizing the new converts, but when Peter and John join him, they pray that the converts will receive the Holy Spirit. Does this suggest that baptism is a two-tier process? Perhaps an alternative explanation is to see baptism as a 'one-off' event, but the blessing of the Holy Spirit as a continuous process. St. Paul urges the Ephesians to 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18), suggesting that this should be a regular, daily prayer for all believers. We can never have too much of the Spirit!

The latter verses of chapter 8 recount the familiar story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Having obeyed the Spirit's promptings to head off south, despite all the exciting things going on in Samaria, Philip is put in the right place for this seemingly chance encounter with an Ethiopian Jew, travelling home from Jerusalem, and using his time to read the prophet Isaiah. There is a long tradition of a Jewish community in Ethiopia, as far back as the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In a story that has similarities to the disciples on the Emmaus road, we see Philip leading this man on a journey of discovery through the Scriptures to discover that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the one who was 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' and gave his life so that we may live. Having heard this good news, the eunuch cannot contain his excitement, and asks for immediate baptism.

Christian tradition says that the eunuch becomes the first evangelist to the Ethiopians. Whilst we have no way of authenticating this, what is unquestionably true is that the Ethiopian church is one of the oldest in the world, and dates itself back to apostolic times.

This story reminds us of the importance of being where God wants us to be. Philip could easily have felt that his presence was indispensable in Samaria, yet his obedience to God resulted in the opening up of a brand new mission field in a completely different place. He is also alert to an opportunity when it arises. He could easily have believed that he was being sent to Gaza to preach, and that the journey

time was just an interlude, but it is whilst he is on the road that he meets the Ethiopian.

If we pray for opportunities and stay close to those in need, doors will open. The story challenges us to be alert. Being an 'ambassador for Christ' is a full-time responsibility.

What we see is Philip's faithfulness. He was willing to serve God wherever and whenever it pleased the Lord to use him.